

God Needs Trailblazers

They cross dangerous rivers, hike through deserts and drive into impenetrable jungles. There's nowhere on the planet Philip and Sharon Smethurst won't go for Jesus.

Wanted: Adventurous young adult willing to travel to exotic, remote lands to advance the kingdom of God. Think apostle Paul meets *Survivor*.

That's the adventure premise offered by a progressive organization seeking to redefine the missionary of the new millennium as he or she journeys into regions considered off the beaten path. With its motto, "Any Road, Any Load, Any Time," Overland Missions is a little-known apostolic ministry that some view as revolutionizing missions work for churches and Christians.

Describing journeys similar to those found in the Acts of the Apostles, Overland sojourners say they have witnessed the salvation of whole villages, healings, people set free from demons and outright miracles during expeditions to southern Africa and the Amazon Basin of South America.

But unlike first century missionaries, Overland "apostles" are equipped with high-tech tools that include Global Positioning Systems, satellite phones, Zodiac inflatable boats and overland expedition trucks.

Since launching Overland three years ago, founder and expedition expert Philip Smethurst has been recruiting, leading and mobilizing young adults to do "extreme" missions work. He says it isn't unusual for his group to travel two days by canoe in search of a tribe that has never heard of Jesus and to discover that they often are the first Westerners to come to the village.

The ministry, though, is not interested merely in conversions.

It works alongside local churches and Bible schools in Third World countries, establishing partnerships in an effort to make disciples in each area.

“The heart of our mission consists of building solid relationships with the local people, showing them Christ through our love,” Smethurst says.

Russell Cephas, mission director for Full Counsel Christian Fellowship, a ministry based in Little Rock, Arkansas, says: “I believe [Overland] is one of the most exciting and innovative mission ministries that exist today.

“For many years, missionaries endured the rugged terrain of jungles and crossed dangerous rivers and swamps, forging their way into uncharted areas to reach unreached people groups with the gospel.

“Phil has been able to develop a mission strategy that is similar to that of the early missionary pioneers, but with the use of modern technology,” adds Cephas, who first heard about Overland in 1999 while ministering in Harare, Zimbabwe. “He has been able to merge the best of the two worlds together—the rough exploratory dimensions of missions with 21st century technology.”

Faith and the Real World

Passionate about mission work since his conversion as a teenager in South Africa, Smethurst started his work as a backpacking, itinerant preacher, a role that took him around the world at age 21.

“I realized the opportunity for young adults to travel and minister in that manner because of its effectiveness, mobility and flexibility,” Smethurst, 34, told Charisma. “I felt like I was just a prototype of the young adult. I saw the potential for the young adult to be an itinerant apostolic minister of the gospel.”

David Montecalvo, 20, says one of the “most incredible highlights” of his life happened last summer during a five-week trip across central and eastern Africa. During a visit in a village near Tushinga, Zimbabwe, he and another Overland member prayed for a 55-year-old man who had been blind since birth.

“I didn’t know how to pray so I just prayed this simple, ‘Lord, heal him,’ prayer,” says Montecalvo, youth pastor of Word of Life Christian Church in Merritt Island, Florida. “He opened his eyes, and he could see, but he couldn’t see clearly—like the man in the Bible who could only see something like trees after Jesus healed him.

“So we continued to pray for him,” Montecalvo adds. “He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he could see clearly. He started running around. It was just awesome. Tears ran down my face as I saw this man completely set free. My faith was just built up.”

Eric Partin, 40, youth pastor of Merritt Island’s East Coast Christian Center, considers the unorthodox yet effective approach of Overland to be “the wave of the future.”

“I have found the nature of these trips is exactly what the generation of this new millennium is looking for—something extreme, radical and with purpose,” says Partin, who has seen several young people from his church go on Overland trips.

Cephas says he is “absolutely confident that Overland is ordained of God.”

“There is a powerful anointing that rests on this ministry,” he says. “God supernaturally raises up the right kinds of people to be involved with every trip.”

Adds Partin: “Overland’s trips are modeled after Paul’s missionary trips in the book of Acts. I believe it’s a formula for successful missions for young adults.”

David Philips says doing the work of an overseas missionary seemed like “mission impossible” until he heard Smethurst speak in 1999. Philips, 20, recalls Smethurst challenging the young people at Merritt Island’s Word of Life Christian Church to consider “the whole missionary adventure.”

“I had a preconceived notion of a missionary, which Philip blew out of the water,” Philips says. “I thought it was an older person who taught kids Sunday school, someone who wasn’t mobile and who just ministered in one place. But Philip said missions work wasn’t all like that. It was something that I could relate to and be involved with. I felt a connection with my passion for missions.”

Since then, Philips has taken several Overland expeditions. He currently is on a yearlong backpacking excursion that will take him around the world, with jaunts through South America, New Zealand, Australia, Asia and Africa.

Mission Possible

Smethurst targets adults in their 20s because he says they usually feel left out of participating in missions work in the typical local church. In addition, he says church leaders “sometimes battle to release young adults because of their lack of knowledge of travel and geography.”

Since the small, nonprofit charismatic ministry began in 1999, Overland has taken more than 130 people ages 18-50 on expeditions. But the average age of an Overland missionary is 23. Smethurst believes God has called him to “resurrect the apostolic ministry in young adults.”

“Apostleship basically has been misconstrued. It’s not earned, or a title, but a job description,” he says, citing Romans 1:5. “It’s part of the task at hand. That’s why we are raising up young adults as young apostles. We’re demanding from them apostleship, not just evangelism.

"We're not asking young adults for one year of their life or for them to live in the Third World. But we're asking them to take responsibility for the Third World. That's apostleship," Smethurst says.

According to the Travel Channel, backpackers make up 60 percent of the tourists worldwide. Smethurst notes that backpackers have been responsible for changing the spiritual climate of a predominantly Hindu island in Southeast Asia, which previously had a strict moral culture.

"Over the last 15 years, backpack tourism has perverted the culture of Bali, Indonesia, with drugs, alcohol and prostitution," he says. "If young adult backpackers began to travel around the world with the gospel, we could impact whole islands and nations."

Based in Cape Canaveral, Florida, Smethurst and his wife, Sharon, primarily get the word out about Overland by speaking at churches, universities and schools. Although the majority of Overland travelers are Americans, citizens from Australia, England and Ireland have taken the journeys.

"Eighty percent of our alumni come back a second and third time," Smethurst says. "Last summer, half of the people who came with us on our two expeditions are alumni, so they really believe in what we do."

Sharon, 32, who was born in Portugal and raised in Brazil by her missionary parents, says that "the same feeling people get from watching Survivor is the same feeling that draws them to us."

"But we differ from Survivor in that we don't vote the people out," she says. "We really want to take as many people as we can to the nations."

The pair, however, are not novice world-travelers. Smethurst has been to more than 40 countries; Sharon to 30.

Besides ministering globally for 12 years and serving in the South African military for two years, including fighting in Angola's civil war, Smethurst is rated in a secular capacity as an "expedition specialist."

"When I was 26, I entered the International Camel Trophy, which is the biggest expedition event in the world," says Smethurst, who talks like a military strategist, using terms such as reconnaissance and pre-reconnaissance to describe Overland trips. "I was selected to train expedition teams for five years, so my expedition experience is not just as a Christian."

Calling All Adventurers

Overland ventures cost half as much as secular expeditions, according to Smethurst. With a price tag of about \$2,300, which includes food and accommodations but not airfare, the trips run for five weeks and cover thousands of miles throughout five countries. A typical journey comprises 20 people.

"If we fill the trips with 20 people, it helps pay for the vehicles," Smethurst says. The secondhand, heavy-duty, four-wheel drive overland trucks cost about \$20,000 each. Other equipment, such as the Zodiac vessels with outboard motors and boats for the Amazon River, are also paid for with the trip fees.

"The price we charge is very affordable because we do our homework," he says. "Most of the accommodations are tent and camp sites. Even though we have field kitchens on the trucks, we eat very well because we buy fresh meat and vegetables from the local markets."

Although Overland travelers are expected to "rough it" as they encounter rugged terrain and harsh natural elements, they are not pushed to the limit like the contestants on Survivor.

"We only try some local stuff that we know is safe, such as the fried Maponi worms, which are caterpillars found in Zimbabwe and Zambia," Smethurst says. They never have had an incident of food poisoning, he adds. "We avoid things like fried rats on skewers that are sold in the streets of Malawi."

Safety is a top priority, he says. There are no expeditions to Sudan or other war-torn countries, or to nations closed to tourism, such as Angola.

One added precaution is an insurance policy with Lloyds of London that enables Overland teams to be evacuated by helicopter within two hours of any emergency. In addition, the teams utilize water purifiers and long-range fuel tanks for the overland vehicles, backup trucks, a sophisticated satellite phone and VHF high-frequency radios for short-distance communication.

Smethurst says the wild animals of Africa pose the biggest danger for his groups, though Overland has never had a wildlife attack or incident.

"We've had lions, buffaloes and elephants go near our campsites," he says. "We've had a herd of stampeding elephants run out in front of our truck."

The expeditions, though, are not all ministry work and no play. Smethurst says every trip allows ample leisure time for white-water rafting, bungee jumping, going on a safari or spending a day on the beach.

"It is amazing to see a rhino run through a soccer game, as we experienced in Zimbabwe, or to catch a glimpse of the mighty power of God through Victoria Falls, one of the seven wonders of the world," says Scott Aronson, 21, who has been on several Overland campaigns.

The biblical-studies major at Taylor University, a Christian

college in Indiana, describes the trips as “physically exhausting experiences, but well worth it.”

“You work from the crack of dawn to late in the night, and you aren’t simply caring for yourself, but for the well-being of the entire team,” he says. “There were times when no villagers would respond to the gospel. It was not all success, but we just trusted the Lord. Only God can change hearts.”

Smethurst says in many ways Overland’s pioneering work is a continuation of the efforts started by his hero, David Livingstone, the legendary Scottish missionary and African explorer who lived in the 19th century.

“We search out areas that have never heard the gospel,” he says. “The roads outside the major cities of Africa and other parts of the Third World are untraveled by the church.

“The task is mammoth. We could use a thousand overland trucks for what we want to do. It’s not glamorous. It may take all day to go to a village of 20, but to me that is awesome.”

Bridging the Gap

Despite applying no major advertising and having limited publicity, Smethurst hopes to attract more young adults and church youth groups by offering 20 shorter expeditions, each of which cost about \$1,100. Starting in December, Overland will embark on two-week African trips in addition to its longer journeys to the Amazon Basin and Africa.

In two years, he envisions Overland venturing into other areas, including Western Africa, Europe, Southeast Asia and other parts of South America.

He is researching the prospects for a Sahara Desert expedition that would cross seven West African Islamic countries. Another trip would travel from Ecuador to Tierra del Fuego, the island on the southernmost tip of South America.

Starting next year, Smethurst also will start a formal Overland internship program, which would offer hands-on missionary and Bible training.

"The young adults would work six months with a local church, then six months on an Overland Missions expedition," he says. "We want to bridge the gap of the missionary syndrome, where people come back from the field and don't fit in the local church. The program is going to make Survivor look like a childish game."

Jim Hoyle, who moved his family from Texas to Florida in June to run the program, says his family was excited about working with Overland because it's "relevant and full of global opportunities." Hoyle, his daughter, two sons and a daughter-in-law went on Overland's Amazon summer expedition.

"This is the ideal place for the MTV generation," says Hoyle, 52, who served on staff at Eagle's Nest Christian Fellowship in San Antonio before joining Overland. "There is also room for a few para-generational Joshuas and Calebs to help mentor and direct these young visionaries."

Like the Smethursts, Hoyle, who is originally from New Zealand, won't have a salary but will raise his own support.

"God is speeding up the process of world evangelism, and it's going to take new methods and youthful zeal to accomplish the goal," Hoyle told *Charisma*. "I see the Lord using Overland Missions to advance the kingdom in a rapid, strategic way."

He believes many young people will find their sense of calling and purpose as they "climb higher into the world of faith and supernatural provision associated with extreme missions."

Says Hoyle: "The heart of Overland Missions is highly relational both within the expedition teams and the way they reach out to tribal groups. They're always taking the time to understand that the kingdom of God is all about people."

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